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U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk says he opposes sending additional troops to Iraq, and that Iraqi authorities should accept more responsibility for security in their country.

While Kirk said he supports winding down the U.S. military presence in Iraq, he said a precipitous withdrawal of American troops would be a mistake.

"We shouldn't set a timetable because we should have a strategy for winning in Iraq, and not losing," said Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park, who began his fourth term in Congress last week.

Kirk addressed the war the new Democratic-controlled Congress and a host of other issues during a Jan. 3 press conference at his Northbrook office. Responding to a reporter's question, Kirk also said he has no plans to run for the U.S. Senate in 2008.

"I'm entirely focused on the 10th Congressional District of Illinois," he said. "I'm overwhelmingly likely to run again for the 10th District (in two years)."

Iraq visit

Kirk visited Iraq in December as part of a congressional delegation that included U.S. senators John McCain, an Arizona Republican, and Joseph Lieberman, a Connecticut independent.

McCain has expressed support for a "surge" of approximately 20,000 additional U.S. troops in an effort to stabilize Iraq. President Bush is said to be leaning toward a troop surge.

But Kirk said increasing troop strength is not the answer. "My hope is that we could actually begin to wind down U.S. troops, not increase them," he said.

After visiting Iraq, Kirk said he believes the morale of the U.S. soldiers is still "very high" and the troops want to see a successful outcome in Iraq. At the same time, he said the Iraqi government needs to find a political solution to end the violence between the Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds. He said the United States should begin turning more sovereignty and control over to Iraqi authorities, ultimately lessening the need for U.S. troops.

"I think overwhelmingly the American people want to back the troops and wind up the mission and that's what Congress should focus on doing," he said.

At the same time, Kirk said he's become increasingly alarmed by the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and he supports an increased military presence there. He said illegal drugs from Afghanistan, which are being smuggled into the United States, pose a growing threat to suburban teens and the profits are helping fuel global terrorism.

New Congress

Regarding the new Democratic Congress which took control last week, Kirk admits that it may be more challenging to get his legislation enacted with the Republicans the minority party and said Illinois could lose some of its political clout now that Dennis Hastert, R-14th, of Yorkville, is no longer Speaker of the House.

Kirk will retain his seniority on the powerful House Appropriations Committee.

As chairman of a group of moderate Republicans in the House, Kirk pledged to work closely with Republicans and Democrats to cut wasteful spending and get the federal budget under control. "There are a number of areas in which we can reduce federal spending," he said.

He said he supports eliminating spending on projects such as the Alaskan "bridge to nowhere," enacting strict limits on pork-barrel spending, re-establishing "pay-as-you-go" budget rules, and killing the "bloated" sugar program in the new Farm Bill.

"I think it's time for Democrats and Republicans to work together in passing the line-item veto," he added.

Kirk thinks Congress can work together on a number of bipartisan issues, including ethics-reform legislation, protecting the environment, supporting embryonic stem cell research and reforming the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

"What we can't allow to happen is gridlock," he said.

Kirk also reaffirmed his commitment to ensuring funding for important local projects.

"During this Congress, we will complete funding for the (Waukegan) harbor cleanup and the VA hospital," he said. "The challenge will be to ensure funding for Metra's new STAR line to reduce suburban gridlock."